

the table

Food & Drink Thursday July 22 2010

The fish that conquered the world

Once you could get it only in top restaurants. Now it's in chip shops. How did sea bass become so popular, asks **Paul Greenberg**

About five years ago, my stepmother told me that she had found a new favourite fish. She'd eaten it on a recent trip to Italy and she was happy to discover on her return that the fish had just become available in many upscale Italian restaurants throughout New York City.

Lunching with her one day, I was introduced to this new creature. It was called "branzino" on the menu and before it hit the flames, the waiter brought the fish out so we could assess its freshness. It was silver, with an attractive, streamlined profile that reminded me of the American striped bass and, although it had been transported from Europe, its gaze was still clear and its scales clamped tightly against its flanks.

Once I'd made the acquaintance of this fish, I found it everywhere. In the dozens of faux-French bistros that have sprouted in US urban centres since the start of the decade, it was called "bar" or "loup de mer"; in Italian trattorias that claimed a

southern or Sicilian provenance, it was known as "spigola", while the Spanish served it up with yellow rice as "robalo". And always when it appeared it was brought out whole and fresh and exactly the size of a dinner plate.

The British call branzino "sea bass". During the next few years, I was to discover that no single fish has a more useful story to tell about the changing relationship between human beings and fish. It's an animal whose natural range stretches from Norfolk to the Nile Delta and whose odyssey through wildness and domestication are as revealing and important as any in the sea.

The Greeks call the European sea bass "lavraki" or "the Clever One", a name that indicates the cultural respect it has achieved in the Mediterranean area of its range. If you wanted to say in Greek that you very cleverly figured out how to make a lot of money you would say that you *epyase lavraki*: "you caught a sea bass". ▶

Romans too valued the fish and served it whole, esteeming its head most of all. Even Ovid found time to praise it: "In exasperation the greedy [fisherman] toils," the poet wrote, "with arts more exquisite the bass bequeals." But whereas the "Clever One" has had heroic stature in Greece for thousands of years, in the UK its historical lack of popularity is summed up by the derivation of its common name bass, from the German *bass* or *barsch* meaning "bristly". It probably is reference to the five-edged spiny rays that jut from the fish's dorsal. Before 1970 people in Britain did not really eat sea bass. Before then there were simply too many other similarly fleshed fish for the bass to stand out. Cod, haddock, plaice, hake — these largely offshore fish were the staples of 20th-century British cuisine.

The growth in popularity of cheap Mediterranean holidays throughout the Seventies introduced the UK to sea bass. Greece began offering cheap packages that gave young UK tourists the chance to plunge into its azure waters for a song. Perhaps the most soothing part of that song was the seaside dinner, a meal of a large whole fish, grilled on an open flame. Usually that fish was a sea bass. In the end, though, it was an expansion in European fisheries policy, not holiday dinners at the seashore, that proved to be the driving force behind the surge in sea bass popularity. When more traditional Northern European fish such as cod and haddock began declining in the 1960s, European nations established a "Total Allowable Catch" or TAC in 1970 to try to limit the exploitation of shared stocks of fish. Oddly, European sea bass were never included as part of the TAC roster. They were considered "local" fish that the different European nations did not have to share. With no bureaucratic quota in their way, fishermen "commercialised" the sea bass, subjecting it to untraditional fishing pressure. Pair trawling and gill netting were popular ways of scooping up bass in UK waters. In the Mediterranean tossing a stick of dynamite into the sea to stun an area of the Clever Ones became a more common practice.

If you consider yourself an angler, there is nothing more depressing than standing on the quays of a Greek island and watching the old commercial fishermen with their meagre catch of palm-sized fish. True, the Mediterranean is what scientists call an "oligotrophic sea", ie, a sea with little nutrition. Few rivers flow into it and so there is a paucity of organic material at the base of its food chain. It has therefore never had large populations of big fish such as sea bass.

With the boom in northern travel to the European south in the 1970s, however, fishing methods became increasingly extreme to put all those whole-grilled fish in front of all those hungry tourists. The lack of a fishing quota on sea bass, and increasingly extreme fishing methods, resulted in a significant drop in population. And just as the Scots and Norwegians turned to domestication when wild Atlantic salmon numbers collapsed in Northern Europe, scientists from around the Mediterranean began a region-wide project to tame the sea bass when it too began to disappear from the wild. The domestication of the sea bass has a host of nations and individuals who claim to be the responsible party. But it was



Greece that really took sea bass global, beginning, as it should, with a man at sea.

In 1983 a young marine biologist named Thanasis Frentzos set sail from Cephalonia, an island some archaeologists believe was Odysseus's Ithaca. Frentzos with his impressive beard and heroic nose bears a certain resemblance to Homer's protagonist and so it follows that when he travelled to Sicily to buy 20,000-inch-long sea-bass juveniles his return trip was interrupted by a fierce gale known as "the donkey mistral". Nearly 18,000 bass perished but when he finally returned home he installed the surviving bass in pens and grew them to maturity.

From this first farm (now Kefalonia Fisheries), Greece grew to become the world leader in sea-bass production. And though environmentalists have argued that fish farming can cause organic pollution, the transmission of fish diseases from farmed to wild populations and the over-use of wild "forage" fish for aquaculture feed, the EU poured millions of "cohesion" funds into the Greek sea-bass industry as part of the attempt to bring the poorer European south into economic parity with the north.

Greece has since lost its leading sea-bass farming role to Turkey, but production is still considerable. Over the past decade as much as 70,000 tonnes of sea bass have been grown annually in the Mediterranean compared with a wild harvest of just 5,000 tonnes. And as catches of other fish called "bass" outside of Europe have been restricted by increasingly tight regulations — American striped bass, California white sea bass and Chilean sea bass — the farmed European sea bass has crossed the Atlantic, and landed on the plates of US restaurant diners such as my stepmother.

While David Cameron and President Obama recently dined on a wild American striped bass (the product of improved fisheries management for bass in the US), the rest of us often find ourselves with the much cheaper farmed European bass, regardless of which side of the Atlantic we are on.

So where does this leave us with sea bass today? Back to that grey area, I'm afraid. With so much production of farmed plate-sized bass in the 500g range, fishing pressure on small wild UK bass has indeed eased somewhat and more small wild fish seem to be around. A changing climate and warmer waters more favourable to sea-bass reproduction has also increased the numbers of small fish. But bass farming has caused the fish's reputation to suffer on the plate.

"I think chefs and diners view it as a utilitarian fish," Jay Rayner, the food critic, wrote to me last year. "It stands up well to almost any accompaniment

A host of nations say they domesticated the sea bass but it was Greece that took the fish global

without over-dominating the plate."

Today, farmed sea bass can be found in a wide collection of mid-range eating places and sometimes even in fillet form, deep fried, next to a pile of chips.

With the vulgarising of small bass, the fancy dining set in the UK have come to value big, wild sea bass most of all. The problem is that it takes a long time to grow a big bass in the wild — more than 15 years for a real beauty, and as a result the per kilo price for a big fish is now more than double that of the farmed little one.

Given the huge disparity in their value, some unscrupulous fish sellers have been known to pass off farmed sea bass as the wild variety. Telling them apart isn't easy. Once, while sitting with several marine biologists at an outdoor restaurant in central Greece, I asked them to assess the provenance of a whole grilled European sea bass that I'd bought earlier that day at the Athens central market.

Socrates Panopoulos, a hatchery manager of the Selonda fish farming company, let his junior scientists answer my question first. "The liver," one biologist said, "if the liver is dark red it means the fish is eating a low-fat diet and is probably wild."

"But Kostas," Socrates said, "they have taken out the guts. What are we to do?" "Perhaps the otolith?" another scientist suggested.

Socrates worked a knife into the fish's head and removed the pearly ear bone. Then he counted the otolith's layers that accrue annually, like rings in a tree. "I see four," Socrates said, "and they are uneven. This fish is four years old and wild."

Given another ten years at sea, my purchase could have developed into a thing of rare beauty yet, because of the mounting commercial fishing pressure, younger sport fishers rarely experience the pleasures of landing a bass in excess of 5kg, and rejoice at being able to catch a handful of half-pounders. Malcolm Gilbert, a British angler who has fished sea bass for sport and commercially for more than 50 years, shakes his head sadly at such misguided enthusiasm. "The quote, 'They know no better' comes to



RTTF220202CRD



Baked sea bass with shellfish

Serves 6
INGREDIENTS
 1 dozen clams
 1 dozen mussels
 6 medium raw shrimp
 2 garlic cloves
 1 small onion
 4lb to 5lb sea bass, red snapper or small salmon, boned
 2tbsp chopped parsley
 Freshly squeezed juice of 1 lemon
 ½ cup extra virgin olive oil
 Salt and freshly ground black pepper
 Third of a cup of fine, dry, unflavoured breadcrumbs

METHOD
 Wash and scrub the clams and mussels. Discard those that stay open when handled. Put them in a pan broad enough so that they don't need to be piled up more than three deep, cover the pan, and turn on the heat to high. Check the mussels and clams frequently, turning them over and promptly removing them from the pan as they open their shells.

When all the clams and mussels have opened up, detach their meat from the shells. Put the shellfish meat in a bowl and cover it with its own juices from the pan. To be sure that any sand is left behind, tip the pan and gently spoon off the liquid from the top.

Let the clam and mussel meat rest for 20 or 30 minutes, so that it may shed any sand still clinging to it, then retrieve it

gently with a slotted spoon, and put it in a bowl large enough to contain later all the ingredients except for the fish. Line a strainer with paper towels and filter the shellfish juices through the paper into the bowl.

The steps above may be completed 2 or 3 hours in advance. Shell the shrimp and remove the dark vein. Wash in cold water and pat thoroughly dry with cloth kitchen towels. If using very large shrimp, slice them in half, lengthways. Add them to the bowl.

Mash the garlic lightly with a heavy knife handle, just hard enough to split its skin and peel it. Add it to the bowl. Slice the onions as fine as possible. Add to the bowl. Put all the other ingredients listed, except the fish, into the bowl. Toss thoroughly to coat all the shellfish well.

Preheat the oven to 240C. Wash the fish in cold water inside and out, then pat thoroughly dry with paper towels.

Lay a double thickness of aluminium foil or cooking parchment on the bottom of a long, shallow baking dish, bearing in mind that there must be enough to close over the whole fish. Pour some of the liquid in the mixing bowl over the foil or parchment, tipping back the dish to spread it evenly. Place the fish in the centre and stuff it with all the contents of the bowl, reserving only some of the liquid. If you have opted for having the fish split into two fillets, sandwich the contents of the bowl between them. Use the liquid you have just reserved to moisten the skin side of the fish. Fold the foil or parchment over the fish, crimping the edges to seal slightly throughout, and tucking the ends under the fish.

Bake in the upper third of the preheated oven for 35 to 45 minutes, depending on the size of the fish. After removing it from the oven, let the fish rest for 10 minutes in the sealed foil or parchment. If the baking dish is not presentable for the table, transfer the still-sealed fish to a platter. With scissors, cut the foil or parchment open, trimming it down to the edge of the dish. Don't attempt to lift the fish out of the wrapping, because it is boneless and will break up.

Place the fish 4 to 5 inches from the source of heat. Do not discard its marinade. If cooking on charcoal or with wood, throw the bay leaves into the fire, otherwise omit. Grill on both sides until done, turning the fish once. Depending on the thickness of the fish steaks or the size of the whole fish, it may take between 5 and 15 minutes. While cooking, baste the top with marinade. Serve piping hot from the grill.

Serve it directly from the foil or parchment, slicing the fish across as you might a roast, pouring some of the juices over each portion.

Grilled fish, Romagna style

Serves 4
INGREDIENTS
 2½-3lb whole fish, gutted and scaled, or fish steaks
 Salt
 Black pepper, freshly ground
 ½ cup of extra virgin oil
 2tbsp freshly squeezed lemon juice
 Sprig of rosemary or ½ tsp of dried leaves, finely chopped
 Third of a cup of fine, dry unflavoured breadcrumbs
 A charcoal or wood-burning grill (optional)
 Small branch of bay leaves or dry leaves (optional)

METHOD
 Wash the fish or the fish steaks in cold water, then pat dry thoroughly with paper towels.

Sprinkle the fish liberally with salt and pepper on both sides, put it on a large platter, and add the olive oil, lemon juice and rosemary. Turn the fish two or three times to coat it well. Add the breadcrumbs, turning the fish once or twice again until it has an even coating of oil-soaked breadcrumbs. Marinate for 1 or 2 hours at room temperature, turning and basting the fish from time to time.

If using charcoal or wood, light the charcoal in time for it to form white ash before cooking, or the wood long enough in advance to reduce it to hot embers. If using an indoor gas or electric grill, preheat it at least 15 minutes before you are ready to cook.

Place the fish 4 to 5 inches from the source of heat. Do not discard its marinade. If cooking on charcoal or with wood, throw the bay leaves into the fire, otherwise omit. Grill on both sides until done, turning the fish once. Depending on the thickness of the fish steaks or the size of the whole fish, it may take between 5 and 15 minutes. While cooking, baste the top with marinade. Serve piping hot from the grill.

The Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking by Marcella Hazan is published by Pan Macmillan at £25. To order it for £22.50 visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop

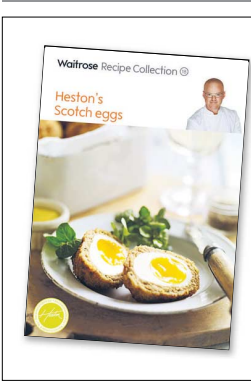
Four Fish by Paul Greenberg is published by Allen Lane/Penguin Classics on July 29 at £14.99. To order it for £13.49 inc p&p call 0845 271234 or visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop

Michelin-starred chef Tom Aikens demonstrates how to pan-fry sea bass
 thetimes.co.uk/recipes

mind," he says. Like Gilbert, I'd like to see wild sea bass managed more carefully. Bigger size limits for both the commercial and sport fishing sectors would help the big bass proliferate. And at least one government report found that big bass and a thriving sport fishing community could bring financial benefits to coastal towns.

So I offer up here two Marcella Hazan recipes to mark a demarcation that could return balance to British bass. One is for a whole grilled farmed fish in the 350g to 500g range is simple, fast and cheap, much like the aquacultured animal itself. The other, for a stuffed boneless big bass is more complex and harder to master. If you were going to make this second recipe, I'd prefer you did it only once a year or even more rarely on the seldom good occasion that you're able to catch a big wild bass all by yourself. But hold on tight if a big bass bites. They are the cleverest of all, as Ovid presumably attests.

"The crafty bass, whenever the conscious feel
 Deep in their jaws infix'd the barbed steel
 Writhe with restive fury backward bound
 The hook dismissing through the widen'd wound."



Pick up Heston's Scotch eggs recipe card, exclusively at Waitrose this week.

Waitrose
 The recipe for great food